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# **JOURNEY TO FREEDOM**

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**Rochester Institute of Technology  
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences**

**Thesis submitted**

**For**

**Master of Fine Arts Degree**

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I would like to thank each one of my committee members: Keith Howard, Eileen Feeney Bushnell, and Robert Keough for their positive advice and never-ending support. Lastly but immensely, a big thanks to David J Reed, my friend and classmate, who's been a constant source of support with my study at RIT.

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## List of Exhibition Images

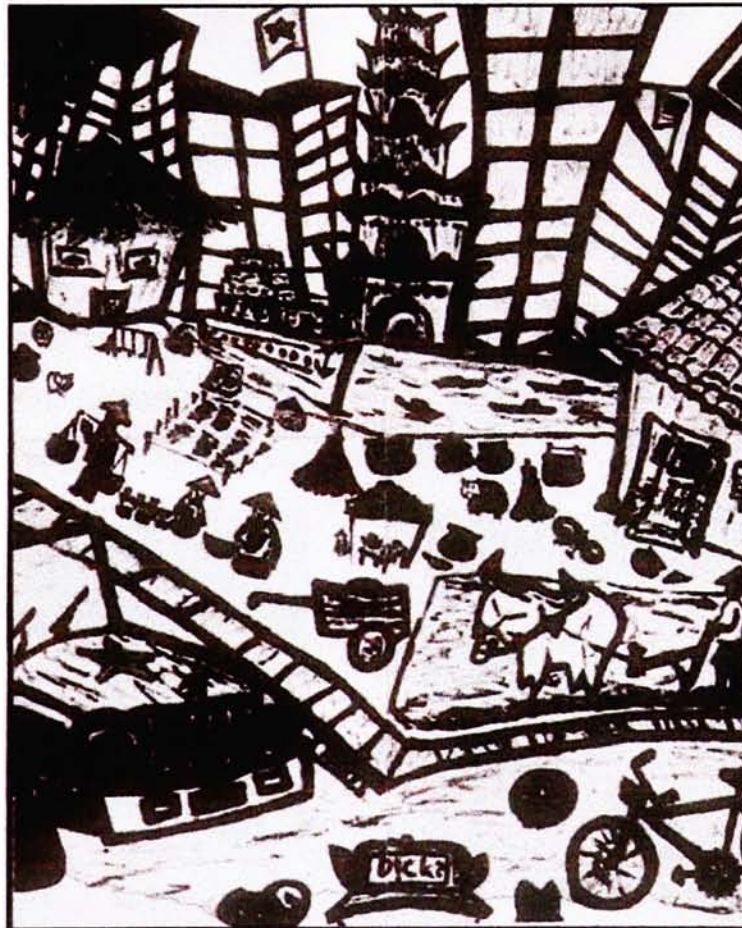
1. *Fishing #2 (series)*. Intaglio-Type and chine collé. 32" x 24". 2002
2. *Home #1 (series)*. Intaglio-Type and chine collé. 32" x 48". 2002
3. *Riding Home #1 (series)*. Intaglio-Type and chine collé. 32" x 48". 2002
4. *Fishing Out of the Pot #1 (series)*. Intaglio-Type and chine collé. 32" x 48". 2002
5. *Jumping Out of the Pot #1 (series)*. Intaglio-Type and chine collé. 32" x 48". 2002
6. *Biking #1 (series)*. Intaglio-Type and chine collé. 32" x 24". 2002
7. *Happy World #5 (series)*. Intaglio. 60" x 38". 2002

## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate imagery that encompasses my early memories of Vietnam, my immigration to a new country, and my current situation in America. This investigation will also include both my use of *Rostow & Jung's* water-based intaglio inks, and non-toxic printmaking techniques to help illustrate my imagery.

I will discuss not only the similarities and differences of artists who have influenced my work but also my source material. The latter, gained through the observation and documentation of my family, friends, and environmental images.

My thesis comprised seven images of which I will discuss four. The first one will be *Happy World* #5.



Tung Hoang, *Happy World* #5 (series), Intaglio-Type- 60" x 38". 2002



All of my images are derived from source materials that I use as references. This print is a compilation of simple sketches made from photographs that I recorded during my recent visit back to Vietnam as an adult that have been combined with imagery recollected from my earlier memories. The following examples and details show how the references were used.

The dwelling protruding from the right middle ground of the image was a direct interpretation of a dwelling I photographed in my village as seen in the examples below (detail # 1)



(detail #1).  
Tung Hoang, *Happy World #5 series*  
Intaglio-Type, 60" x 38". 2002



(detail #1). Tung Hoang. Photograph

The boats in the river came from an image I took of a standard cargo boat and home for many Vietnamese inhabitants as seen in the examples below (detail #2)



(detail #2).  
Tung Hoang, *Happy World #5 series*  
Intaglio-Type, 60" x 38". 2002



(detail #2). Tung Hoang. Photograph

And the Pagoda, in the background, is referenced from the **Thien Mu** temple I photographed in Hue province seen in the examples below. (detail #3)



(detail #3).  
Tung Hoang, *Happy World #5 (series)*,  
Intaglio-Type, 60" x 38", 2002



(detail #3). Tung Hoang. Photograph

The inspiration for this *Happy World #5* comes from the work of the Vietnamese artist Bui Xuan Phai (1920-1988). Although we came from a different generation, we shared a common purpose. However, both our lives have similarities and differences. We were both born in Hanoi and were influenced by a foreign culture. He attended the *Ecole des Beaux Arts d'Indochine* and was influenced by the Paris school of painting, which was established by the French colonialists in 1925,<sup>1</sup> and I studied at both the *Southern Connecticut State University* and the *Rochester Institute of Technology* in the United States. Both of us utilized every kind of material we could find. He used old letters, newspapers and cigarette packs. I use cardboard, aluminum, sandpaper, discarded fabrics, and telephone books.

The two main differences between us are that he worked mostly in oil painting and gouache and I work in all mediums. He never left Vietnam and I did.

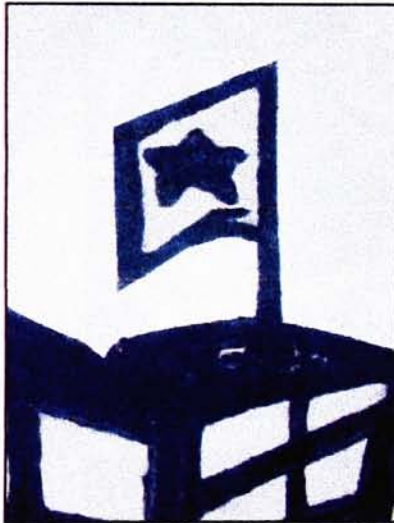
There are also similarities and differences in our image making (see page 5). Both images are monochromatic, have bold simple stroked lines, and have a similar viewpoint of the horizon line. Both utilize a non-traditional use of western perspective, askew verticals, and several vanishing points.



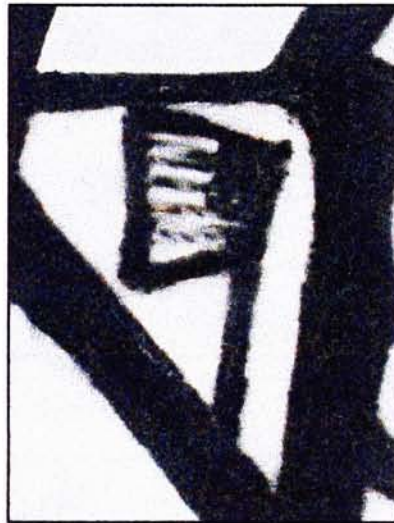
Both introduce a foreground, middle ground, and background. In Phai's image, the foreground is established by a curving wall, which takes the viewer back into the middle ground, where the farmer and dwellings are introduced. The background shows trees, the sky, and another farmer.

In my image, the foreground is depicted by a curved sidewalk, which leads the viewer into the middle ground. At this point the village life is introduced, comprising farmers, merchants, food stands, tilled fields, and the marketplace.

The background is established by water, which separates the farm life from the city life. It is depicted by both Vietnamese and American architecture as shown by the tall skyscrapers, the pagoda, and the flags of both countries seen in the examples below. (details #4 and #5)



(detail #4).  
Tung Hoang, *Happy World #5 (series)*,  
Intaglio-Type, 60" x 38", 2002



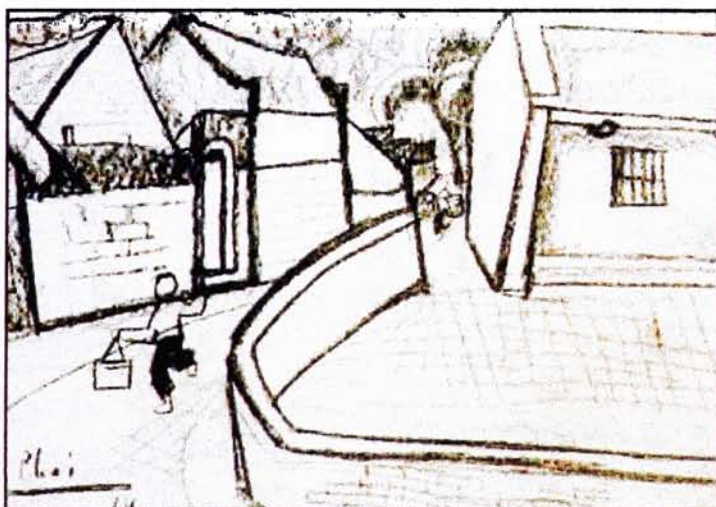
(detail #5).  
Tung Hoang, *Happy World #5 (series)*,  
Intaglio-Type, 60" x 38", 2002

Both illustrate simple everyday life, depicted by a farmer carrying a *Don-ganh*, which is a carrying device that sits on either one or two shoulders, depending on the weight, and supports two hanging baskets. This is the traditional method of transporting goods, to and from the market, which is still in use today.

The main differences are that his work is of a smaller scale than mine, and represents a real place in Hanoi while mine is a collage that represents a fictitious environment



Tung Hoang, *Happy World #5 (series)*, Intaglio-Type, 60" x 38", 2002



Bui Xuan Phai, *Countryside Landscape 2*, Pencil on Paper, 15" x 20.5"

### **Printing *Happy World* #5**

The prints are created by drawing on four separate offset aluminum plates with a mixture of carborundum and screen filler.

The immediate foreground is then cut with scissors around the bottom contours of the drawings to create a white area that will allow the embossment of the plate and the texture of the road to stand out. The same principle is applied to the background to distinguish between the plate tone of the buildings and the white of the skyline.

The materials used, and the manner of application, are also integral to the finished product. Carborundum is used because it creates a variety of embossed textures depending upon the mixture of carborundum and screen filler. Various types of brushwork were employed because heavy brush strokes create bold dark lines where as lighter strokes create softer and gray tones.

Each plate is then separately inked using a non-toxic water-based etching ink, created by *Rostow & Jung*, and run through an etching press at approximately 65lbs per square inch of pressure. The four printed images are then trimmed, reassembled, and closely aligned to create one large image.



The second image I want to discuss is titled *Biking #1*. Overall the image is broken up into two sections. The foreground is more representational of my memories of the Vietnamese's farm life where as the background typifies my current situation of city living in America.



Tung Hoang, *Biking #1 (series)*,  
Intaglio-Type & Chine Colle, 32" x 24", 2002

The bike also has two meanings. The first symbolizes my personal journey of leaving Vietnam, at the age of seven, and enduring the adjustment of two years in refugee camps in China and Hong Kong, and four months drifting in a wooden boat with twenty other families. This time period also embraces the hardships endured, friendships made, and the memories of violence, being jailed, and hunger strikes.

The second meaning symbolizes my life upon reaching America. It was just as arduous. For my parents, it was the difficulty of trying to find a home in Connecticut, looking for work to put food on the table, and trying to learn English. I also had to learn English, but also had to adjust to a new diet and attempt to fit in socially as I was the only Asian in my school. There was very little time for each other. In the end, we all had to deal with the adjustments by ourselves.

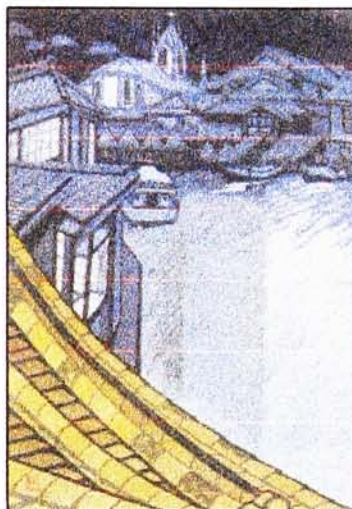
The intruding dwelling on the right side represents a traditional Vietnamese home that was a part of my childhood. The small Ceramic container, known as a *Chum*, in the center of the image and connected to the bike, represents a form of nourishment and survival. This container, in Vietnam, is used for both the storage of food and water.

The background buildings represent American skyscrapers. The ridged western-style bridge symbolizes a vehicle that replaces the boat and expresses my migration and identity change from a Vietnamese national to an American citizen.

Biking #1 was influenced by the work of the Japanese artist Jun-ichiro Sekino (1914-1988). At this point, I want to discuss the similarities and differences between our works.



Jung Hoang. *Biking #1* (series).  
Intaglio-Type & Chine Colle, 32" x 21", 2002



Jun-ichiro Sekino. *Amakusa* from "Traka 12 titles,"  
Woodcut, 33" x 22", 1976

The major similarity is that the subject matter in both our prints relates to our childhood. Like Sekino, I remember my childhood in Vietnam and "...my home town is deeply impressed in my mind."<sup>2</sup>

At first glance it may not appear evident, but both images have a similar composition. The placement and angle of the bicycle in my image, mimics the diagonal thrust of the roofline in Sekino's image. This angle forces the viewer's eyes to sweep from the foreground up the left side of the image and into the background. There is also a similarity concerning the placement of the building/bridge in my



image and the buildings in Sekino's image. In both images the homes extruding from the sides, and the horizon line is seen from the same vantage point.

Both prints have a dominant object in the foreground and incorporate images of transportation; Mine being a bicycle and Sekino's being a boat. Both of us use outlines and tone to define the object and include the concept of water. Sekino depicts water by drawing a boat on a liquid surface, and I simply use the icon of a bridge.

The perspective in both images is similar, although it may not appear so. Sekino uses atmospheric perspective to create the illusion of depth. The foreground is rendered using a large-scale, highly detailed roof. The mid-ground is created, by introducing less detailed, medium size buildings, and the background is created by depicting even smaller and less detailed buildings. I use the bicycle to introduce the foreground, a medium size dwelling to create the mid-ground, and the smaller skyscrapers and bridge to create the background.

The difference between our prints is that I use white space, as a ground, and do not use detail to distinguish between objects in the foreground and background. Also, Sekino's image depicts the evening and mine depicts the day. The depth of field, in Sekino's image, is attained by the use of complimentary color whereas mine is created using analogous colors.

Sekino's work is inspired by a specific location. He loves traveling, finding a location and as he said "... being impressed, drawing a picture, going back to the studio, making a block copy, carving a wood, [and] printing a picture..."<sup>3</sup>. Whereas my work is created through a combination of images, from the past and present that I have combined to make a fictitious environment.

He also uses a lot of detail and varied line work to illustrate his scene, whereas I use a minimum of detail and bold line work to express my image. His imagery is more related to traditional woodblock printmaking, whereas mine is more related to contemporary collagraph and intaglio techniques.

### **Printing *Biking #1***

*Biking #1* is printed using a different process than was used for Happy World #5. In this image, photographs of family and friends were scanned separately and manipulated in Adobe Photoshop. Transparencies were created from these photographs via an inkjet printer. The transparencies were

then used as templates for transferring the images to ImageOn ULTRA®, a photo-polymer emulsion. The emulsion was then laminated on to an aluminum plate, in designated areas, and developed to produce an intaglio-Type plate. This plate was then drawn over with carborundum and screen filler, to create a painterly effect over the images.

The final plate is then inked, using *Rostow & Jung's* non-toxic water-based etching ink. The subtle color scheme is created by introducing thin sheets of transparent Vietnamese paper, cut and shaped to fit certain parts of the image, placed on the plate, and adhered with rice glue through a printmaking technique known as *chine collé*.

The third image I want to discuss is *Home #1*. As mentioned earlier, all of my imagery comprises an environment of Vietnamese and western iconography that I have created for myself. Every object has a symbolic meaning and in this image I will discuss the major ones.



Tung Hoang. *Home #1 (series)*. Intaglio-Type & Chine Colle. 32" x 48". 2002

This picture continues the journey of my immediate family from one country to another. The pig represents me (detail #1, page 11). According to the Asian lunar calendar, I was born in the year of the pig and possess a lot of its traits. Out of the twelve animals, "Pigs also care a great deal about friends and family and work hard to keep everyone in their life happy"<sup>4</sup>. This trait is evident in the



image as it shows me, as a smiling pig, amongst collaged images of my family and friends smiling and having a good time seen in the examples below. (details #2 and #3)



(detail #1), Tung Hoang, *Home #1* (series),  
Intaglio-type & Chine Colle, 32" x 48", 2002



(detail #2), Tung Hoang, *Home #1* (series),  
Intaglio-type & Chine Colle, 32" x 48", 2002



(detail #3), Tung Hoang, *Home #1* (series),  
Intaglio-type & Chine Colle, 32" x 48", 2002

The bicycle again represents a vehicle, but in this case it's the continuing search for knowledge. One of the bad traits of pigs is that they can "...be rather exclusive, choosing to spend time with those who will appreciate them most and ignore the rest of the populace"<sup>5</sup>. I don't want to fall into this category, and I am always attempting to meet new people on my journey and introduce them to aspects of my art and life. This interaction also benefits me because it will "...open up [my] world to a diverse group of people" so that I "will truly bloom"<sup>6</sup>.

The Central Vietnamese straw hut represents the home that includes all the immediate family. The placement of the home in the center of the image is very important, because I do not usually work with symmetrical imagery. The House thus symbolizes the center and most important aspect of my life.

As before, the boat (detail #4) represents our escape from Vietnam during the war and the four long months adrift in a small wooden boat with 20 other families on the South Asia Sea.



(detail #4), Tung Hoang, *Home #1* (series),  
Intaglio-type & Chine Colle, 32" x 48", 2002

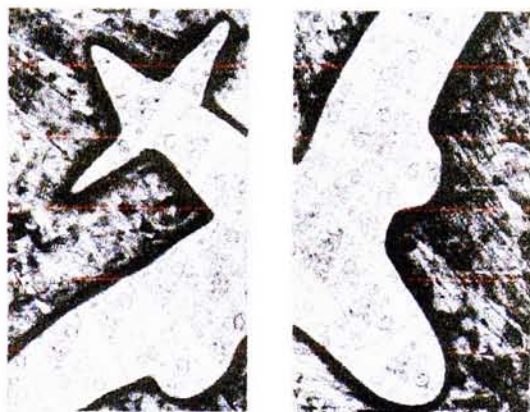
The background buildings and surrounding area, represent both my extended family, in Vietnam, who helped with our escape, and our friends, in America, who helped us assimilate to our new environment.

The Vietnamese water buffalo represents the work ethic of my family. In Vietnam, in order to survive, my family had to plow the ground to grow food. The water buffalo, in our case, was the animal used for this purpose. By western standards, this type of work represents a primitive and difficult lifestyle. Therefore, in my image, the water buffalo reiterates the hardship experienced by my family in arriving in a new country, having to learn a new language, culture, and work ethic to create a safe and comfortable life for the family.

Another impact on my work has been the images of my professor, Keith Howard, who helped influence my decision to study at the *Rochester Institute of Technology*. The image that inspired my work the most is his *Unaccompanied Minors*.



Tung Hoang, *Home - I (series)*,  
Intaglio-type & Chine Colle, 32" x 48", 2002



Keith Howard, *Unaccompanied Minor*,  
Intaglio-type, 23.5" x 74", 2002

The similarity between both images is that they are created as a diptych and are large in scale. Howard's image being 36" x 47" and mine being 32" x 48". Both incorporate imagery relating to the family. However, Howard's image introduces drawings by his daughter and mine introduces photographs of my family.

Both images use the carborundum and screen filler technique to depict the outlines of the images, use the layering of image on film to create multi-layered collagraphic plates, and incorporate imagery inside the basic objects. Howard's images are nestled inside an airplane and my images are nestled inside the straw hut, the water buffalo, and the pig.



The differences between the two images are that Howard uses his daughter's drawing, reproduced several times, to produce a pattern that creates the central image, while my print incorporates multiple photographic images to form several focal images. His print is about one dramatic incident that impacted his life, such as the possibility that his children could have been "unaccompanied minor[s] that may have been on one of those three planes involved with the 9-11 terrorist attack"<sup>7</sup> while mine is about various occasions, involving my close friends in America and extended family in Vietnam, photographed in everyday events.

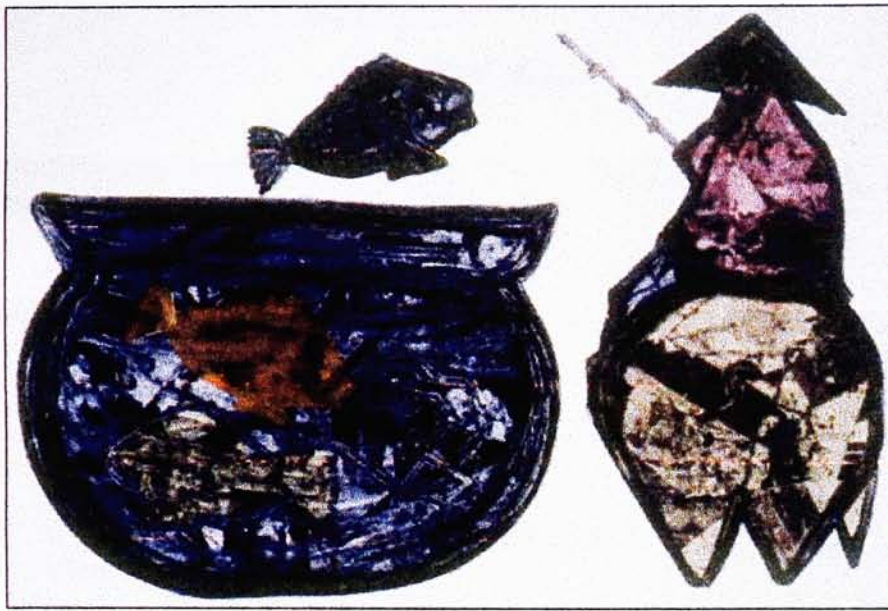
Howard also creates a composition that utilizes a largely dominant white airplane surrounded by a tonal gray and black area that entices the viewer to investigate the imagery within the airplane. Whereas my image uses multiple shapes, and *chine collé* to create muted colors, juxtaposed with a black and gray palette, to create several dominate areas. Both prints, however, hopefully force the viewer to look within the shapes to further investigate the information held within.

### **Printing *Home #1***

The processes used to print *Home #1* and the other images in the exhibition are exactly the same methodology as used in printing *Biking #1*.

The fourth image I would like to discuss is *Fishing Out of the Pot #1*. This artwork and the other two related images, *Fishing #2* and *Jumping Out of the Pot #1*, differ from the rest of the images in a special way. Like the Dalai Lama (b. 1945) who was also a refugee, these prints are meant to convey the happiness and contentment we feel as American citizens living in the United States. "We are sustained in this great quest for happiness..." and know, "...even if we do not admit it, that there can be no guarantee of a better, happier life than the one we are leading today"<sup>8</sup>. They also differ in the purposeful lack of the Vietnamese farm life, architecture and related imagery.





Tung Hoang, *Fishing Out of the Pot - I (series)*, Intaglio Type & Chine Colle, 32" x 48", 2002

In this particular image, the large pot epitomizes the strength and the heart of my parents. Simple and loving parents with a strong will for survival. My three older brothers, sister, and myself would not live a life of prosperity here in the United States without the guidance of my parents. They relinquished all their materialistic values and tried their best to shelter us from harm through our journey to freedom. There are no words to express my love for them. The statement, “a picture is worth a thousand words”<sup>9</sup>, is expressed by the huge pot that signifies not only the size of my love for my parents but also acts as an anchor to dominate the composition.

The water buffalo is purposely facing away from the viewer to indicate a vehicle that is carrying the family into the future that promises new friends, opportunities, good health, and a continuing prosperous life.

The act of catching the fish signifies the family finding freedom in the US. The fish itself represents the replacement of the commodities that my family lost after leaving Vietnam.

In conclusion I would like to reiterate that the purpose of this thesis has been to investigate imagery that encompasses my early memories of Vietnam, my immigration to a new country, and my current situation in America. I believe that I have achieved this goal especially through the use of *Rostow & Jung's* water-based intaglio inks, and the use of non-toxic printmaking techniques that have helped me illustrate my imagery.

## End notes

1. Michael Rastrup Smith, *Bui Xuan Phai*, Thavibu Gallery. 5 July, 2003  
<<http://www.thavibu.com/articles/ATC11.htm>>
2. Katsuko Sekino *Jun-ichiro Sekino the Prints*. Abe Publishing Company, Tokyo. 1997. Page 11.
3. *Ibid.* Page 11.
4. “Pig”, *Chinese Astrology*. Astrology.com. 1995-2003.  
<<http://chinese.astrology.com/pig.html>>
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Dawn Henderby (intro), *Keith Howard-Stomping on Perceptions*. Gracefield Arts Centre. Dumfries & Galloway Council Arts Service. Dumfries, Scotland. 2002. Page 19.
8. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the new millennium*, Riverhead Books, New York. 1999. Page 4
9. Unknown source.

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